Beleue in one God. The
father almightie maker of heauen and earth.
and of all thynges viſible, and inuiſible:

DEPARTMENT OF CHURCH MUSIC

Under Direction of Harold W. Gilbert, Mus.Bac.

The houre commeth and now it is,
when true worſhippers ſhall worſhipp the
father in ſpirit and trueth.

Pronunciation for Choristers

By Harold W. Gilbert

Although there are ways in which the inquiring person can find out what is the approved pronunciation of a sticky word, most of us fail to act on the impulse of the moment, and postpone such research until the matter becomes forgotten. It would be a useful project for someone to undertake to publish a handbook of pronunciation for the use of choristers. To a certain extent there is a vocabulary that is peculiar to church music. One may be ever so carefully instructed in the correct usage of our language for the ordinary practices of social and business intercourse, and yet find himself quite embarrassed when face to face with a word to be divided into its component syllables and to be sung with a prolongation of each. There is no such thing as vagueness of enunciation in singing: every syllable must be definite.

A friendly critic once advised the writer that his choristers were mispronouncing the *ble* in such words as visible, able, movable, etc. She stated that the correct sound should be something like a cross between "bull" and "bell." And by way of illustrating her point she pronounced a few such words with the usual rapidity of ordinary speech. Hastily spoken—and vaguely sounded—the illustrations seemed satisfactory, but when slowed down to the speed required for singing they carried no conviction, for the distinctions argued about were then obviously hair-splitting. The dictionary gives us no help in this matter, directing us to say *b'l.* Orthoëpists do not concern themselves with the problems of singers, but deal entirely with those of speakers: hence, they recognize as correct the sounds that result from rapid speech, which in many cases are indefinite and defy analysis. So, in some instances, the singer is compelled to become his own authority.

Usually, correct syllabication of words gives a very definite guidance in determining the sounds of the vowels. The dictionary, of course, syllabifies. *Petition* presents a typical question: How should the *e* be sounded? If the word were syllabified thus, pet-i-tion, the *e* would be short, as in "get." But the correct division of this word is pe-ti-tion, which calls for a long *e,* as in "see." Other such words, often mistreated, are: *believe, descend, desert* (the verb), *celestial, beloved,* and *seraphic.* In some cases, however, it is not so easy to determine the vowel sounds from the syllabication. *Direct,* syllabified di-rect, is pronounced with a short *i,* and not as is so often heard, with a first syllable that sounds like "die." There is no exception to a rule, in this instance—merely indifference to the accepted dictum: "*I,* when final in a syllable, has more commonly its short sound."

While speaking about the letter *i,* it might be well to call attention to the abuse accorded such words as *divide, sanctify, magnify, purify, punish* (and the many other words ending with "ish"), *manifest,* and other such words, all of which should have the *i* sounded as in "pin." A similar sound of short *i* should be given to the final syllable of plurals in which the singular ends with the letter *y*: *mercies, fancies, bodies, beauties,* etc. This naturally leads to the caution about the pronunciation of final *y* in such words as *pity, holy, glory, mighty, majesty, heartily,* etc., which should always be sounded like the *i* in "pin."

The vowel sound of long *u* needs the watchful attention of singers. Although its chief element is a sound like *oo,* it should begin with the sound of *y* or short *i.* Mistreated words in this class are: *duty, tune, lute, endure, tumult;* and such words as *dew, due, blue, new.* But be careful not to pronounce Cherubim thus: Cher-you-bim. The *u* has the same sound as in *rude,* which calls for a slight sound of short *i* at the beginning of the vowel.

While there are many sounds for the letter *a,* the chief difficulty for singers lies in the distinction between "short a" and "broad a." For practical purposes in singing, it seems advisable not to recognize the classification known as "intermediate a," but to group together such words as *last, chaff, ask, glance,* etc., with those that have the true Italian sound of *a*: *arm, laugh, calm,* etc. By doing this, we subject ourselves to criticism, for there is a perfectly definite sound for words in the former group. But so much confusion on this matter exists among singers, that the simplest plan will doubtless prove to be the wisest. Those who wish to perfect their pronunciations to a greater degree will find the distinctions finely drawn for them in the introductory material to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary.

Probably no difficulty is caused by the words that properly have the true Italian sound of *a*: *far, palm, ah,* etc. Let us therefore consider the classification with "intermediate a." Most words fall into this group when they have the letter *a* occurring before *sk, ff, ft, th, ss, sp, st, nce, nt,* and sometimes *nd.* But unfortunately, the rule is not absolute. Here are some examples:

According to rule—

Ask, task, staff, chaff, after, shaft, waft, path, wrath, pass, glass, grass, gasp, clasp, master, fast, cast, last, glance, chance, grant, chant, command, demand.

Exceptions—

Hath, and, hand, land, grand, band, gather, passion. The word *answer* has an "intermediate a."

Of the consonants, the letter *r* seems to cause the most distress, both to the singer and to the listener. While it is possible, if much care is exercised, to sound the *r* on all occasions, the safer plan is to adopt this rule: "*R* before a vowel sound is sounded, but in all other positions it is silent." If we apply this principle, we get the following examples:

Sounded "r"—

Road, groan, bright, hear us, father of all, adoring them, fear of him.

Silent "r"—

Lord, mercy, care not, hear me, father to all, adore them, fear him.

Such words as *fear, hear, care, there,* etc., are pronounced by some people as though spelled with a final *uh* instead of *r.* But such treatment in singing should be most discreetly handled, for the words do not contain two syllables. When an *r* is sounded, it should be produced well toward the front of the mouth—never with the tongue drawn back part way into the throat.

The position of the tongue is likewise of great importance in sounding the letter *l.* The farther forward, the better. In fact, if the singer will take the trouble to acquire a nice enunciation of *l,* he will do much toward making his diction distinct and agreeable to listen to.

(*Continued on other side*)

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There seems to be a habit among singers of arriving at the final *m* of a word before it is time to stop the tone, and the humming sound is unduly prolonged. This procedure may be valuable in vocal exercises to induce resonance, but it is a purely technical trick and is a questionable practice in artistic performance. The final consonant of any word should be delayed to the last possible moment in singing, and then sounded in as short a time as may be, taking care only that it is distinctly audible to the listeners. The undesirable practice here referred to extends also to final *n, ng,* and sometimes *l.* It is equally bad taste in any case.

Rapid speech brings about many situations that the singer must grapple with. The dictionary even adopts phonetic signs that sanction vague vowel sounds. For example, in the word *adore,* the *a* is sounded vaguely in speech. But the singer must determine exactly what sound he should give this vowel. Generally, a broad *a* is best in such cases. In the phrase, "this he said," the *h* in the word *he* is quite lost in rapid speech, but should be distinctly sounded in singing. *Often* suffers the same disadvantage as the *ble* endings. The dictionary says "of'n," and adds that singers sometimes pronounce the second syllable distinctly—"ten." Sounding the letter *t* is not the best taste, however, Phyfe, the well-known authority on such matters, directs that the *t* be omitted.

We seem to enjoy retaining obsolete pronunciations in our church music. In the Te Deum, many of us still sing *acknowledge*, with the *o* sounded as in "know." *Infinite* also becomes distorted. The dictionary does not justify any long sound of *i* in this word.

Akin to obsolete usages is the custom of sounding final *ed* as a separate syllable on almost every occasion. There are precedents for the separate syllable *ed,* but not in all instances. Many composers of church music follow an old custom of treating the *ed* as a separate syllable in verbs used in perfect tense. Thus: "My spirit hath rejoic-ed." "He hath magnifi-ed me." "He hath show-ed strength." "He hath scatter-ed the proud." "He hath fill-ed the hungry."

Ed is often separately sounded when it occurs at the end of a phrase, thus: "The Lord's name be prais-ed." At other times, it may be employed to improve the rhythmic flow of a passage, thus: "And so Pilate releas-ed Barabbas." We have now come to the point where individual taste enters the discussion, and consequently there will be disagreement. Probably the safest course to follow is to be guided at all times by current English usage in correct speech. Some leading authorities on church music are taking a stand against old customs in pronunciation, and recently published Psalters, for example, direct that *ed* be separately sounded only when it would be thus pronounced in good speech today.

One more question of pronunciation should be mentioned—how to pronounce proper names derived from Hebrew and Latin. Those choirmasters who use church music with Latin texts must decide for themselves which of the three methods of pronunciation they will follow—English, Roman, or Continental. The pronunciations of the proper names will, of course, be made consistent with the method used. For choirmasters who do not use Latin texts, and who wish to have a definite plan for their choirs to follow in dealing with Latin and Hebrew proper names, it is recommended that all such names be Anglicised. Jesu (soft sound of *g*—ge-zu), Abraham (begin with long *a*; final *a* short), Israel (Iz-ray-el), David (Day-vid), etc. Consult the dictionary when in doubt!

It is desirable that the choir use pronunciations that are entirely correct, and that the enunciation be refined. At the same time, nothing that smacks of artificiality should be permitted. The words should have real and natural meaning for the congregation, for they are participating in the worship. There is always danger in extremes.